

Balancing this year's rations requires plenty of careful planning

# Thinking outside the silo

Inaccurate weather predictions for August have been experienced first hand by producers all over the UK. And soya supplies are short, making prices high. So balancing forage quantities and quality with the available alternatives will require some additional planning for many producers this winter. We spoke to a nutritionist and a specialist in alternative feedstuffs to assess the options available.

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**A**ssessing feed stocks and qualities is a vital task that needs to be carried out on every unit as soon as possible. That's the view of Thompsons technical specialist James Black.

"With ground conditions proving difficult in many regions and cows being housed by night, account needs to be taken of forage already consumed," he says.

To compound the issue of variable weather and silage characteristics, raw material markets are as elusive as forecasting weather one month ahead.

"The protein saga regarding the tolerance of genetically modified beans is exacerbating the problem and reducing the options for producers. Add to this the cost per unit protein of soya, at more than £6 per percentage, and it becomes a reality that other alternatives need to be investigated when balancing forages this winter," adds alternative feed adviser Jonathan McCaughan.

First-cut silage was ensiled much later than expected in Northern Ireland due to a combination of weather and ground conditions. As a result a lot of material was clamped up to two weeks later than intended and this has had a major impact

on both energy and protein levels. The samples analysed so far indicate silages with good fermentation and with reasonable intakes but low crude protein and energy content (Table 1).

"Irrespective of milk price, the starting point of any feed regime this winter will be the silage analysis. The second aspect will be to address the desired level of production for the herd and the third aspect is to explore what feed ingredients are available to balance the desired production level as cheaply as possible," says Mr Black.

## Moist alternatives

"Although the main focus this winter will be on the cost of protein, at all times ensure that energy requirements of cows are met first. Protein requirements should not over-rule energy supply in the diet, regardless of cost," he warns. With the drier silages already in the clamp, moist alternatives will feature on many yards this winter. While some offer crude savings on the cost of protein, all the products will offer increased dry matter intake and as such improved

Table 1: The average of 360 first-cut silage samples by AFBI, Hillsborough.

dry matter %	31
pH	4.07
ME Mj/kg DM	10.7
crude protein % DM	11.7
NH <sub>3</sub> % total N	7.3
D value	67
FIM intake (g/kg W0.75)	92

Table 2: Nutrient cost comparison September 2009 Northern Ireland

	price (£)	ME	protein	DCP	dry matter	cost DCP (pence/g)	cost prot (pence/g)	cost ME (pence/g)
rapemeal	150.00	12.0	40.0	340	87	0.051	0.043	1.437
Trafford Gold	83.00	13.4	21.0	280	51	0.058	0.077	1.215
soya	310.00	13.4	50.0	440	87	0.081	0.071	2.659
Vitagold	71.00	14.5	12.6	360	35	0.056	0.161	1.399
brewers grains	30.00	11.7	6.0	240	24	0.052	0.208	1.068
pot ale syrup	65.00	14.5	13.7	370	43	0.041	0.110	1.043

All prices are based on artic tipped loads delivered on farm. The dried feed prices are based on today's spot prices. The moist feed prices are current prices for full loads



energy intakes compared to silage-only diets. The saving of silage on some yards will also be a consideration.

Brewers' grains are available from various sources and can serve a dual purpose – replacing silage in circumstances where forage is in short supply, or they can provide a boost of protein and energy for this year's first-cut silage," adds Mr McCaughan.

Vitagold will be an impressive performer in a lot of situations this winter due to

so can be used as a sole concentrate feed if necessary when a diet feeder is available. It is a very palatable and succulent feed which will increase dry matter intakes and usually offers a more consistent supply for continual feeding in large herds," says Mr Black.

"Liquid feeds will also help in certain circumstances. A blend of sugars and degradable protein will help with dry, high fibre forages. Pot ale syrup and molasses blends will all have a place



*James Black: "The starting point of any feed regime this winter will be silage analysis"*

Do not think that cows milking 35 litres plus will work on cheap protein sources completely. They will still require by-pass protein and ERDP supplied from an inclusion of soya or protected soya in the diet," stresses Mr Black.

Although the use of alternatives will be commonplace for many producers this winter, they do not come without a slight warning from Mr McCaughan.

"Before using moist feeds in a diet, care should be exercised to ensure that adequate storage facilities are available on the farm and also that the availability of the product can be ensured. Do not start to use a product if a guarantee on supply is not available.

### **Tailored blends**

"If moist products are not an option, then a tailored blend should be investigated by producers, which may help to maximise the savings available." Tailored blends will allow the inclusion of various protein and energy sources so that the relative nutritional and price ratios can be maximised for each producer. Other protein sources can be utilised in the blend and a balance between energy, protein and fibre achieved for every herd.

Table 2 outlines the relative value of rapeseed against soya and this position should be maximised. "In all circumstances, proper nutritional advice should be sought before purchasing any particular raw material. Just because a raw material is cheap does not mean it will supply or meet the requirements of high yielding cows when fed at high levels," concludes Mr McCaughan.

This winter remember that your cow will need to be fed to her requirements. Do not expect average quality silage to provide more than it is capable of. At all times ensure that energy requirements are met first and then maximise protein availability from the various options that will be practical on your farm. |



*Moist blends can help maximise the savings available to producers*

its high protein content. It combines all the advantages of a moist feed while supplying a high level of degradable protein on a dry matter basis.

Another favourite this winter will be Traffordgold, a product of the milling and distilling of wheat for the human food and drinks industries.

"Traffordgold is well balanced in terms of protein 22% and energy 13.4 MJ/kgDM

where storage facilities are available to take 25-tonne loads at a suitable price," he adds. Table 2 outlines the current situation in Northern Ireland for prices, energy and the protein supplied by various raw materials.

"Be mindful that high yielding cows will need their basic nutritional requirements met and this will mean a range of raw materials could be used.